

California High School Exit Examination (CASHEE) Alternatives Public Meeting December 16, 2005

Testimony of Mary Gill, Consultant, Assembly Higher Education Committee,
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Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on this vital subject. I am here to speak to you from the perspective of postsecondary education. Most policymakers in higher education consider K-12 preparation to be the single most important issue for the future of California's colleges and universities. We applaud the vigorous efforts underway to improve the knowledge and skills of California's students.

I am here to comment specifically, however, on the narrower topic under consideration, CASHEE alternatives. Obviously, the job of higher education is not to award high school diplomas, but rather to make eligibility decisions based upon the student's attainment of a diploma, or lack thereof. Therefore, the focus of higher education is on how we will treat those who do not pass this exam.

First, I will summarize the relationship between a high school diploma and postsecondary opportunity (in admissions and support services), and then I'll examine two specific areas where the CASHEE may have an immediate effect.

In the admissions area, the high school diploma is just one more fact about a particular student. For K-12 Adult Education and the California Community Colleges, no diploma is required. In the California State University and the University of California, a diploma does not guarantee admission nor does the lack of a diploma prohibit admission; a more comprehensive review is permissible. For private colleges (including the for-profit and non-profit career and/or baccalaureate-degree programs), admission is a local standard where a range of factors may be considered. Thus the CASHEE outcome is not likely *solely* to determine a student's admission to college.

Most postsecondary support services (disabled student services, tutoring, mentoring, counseling, EOP/S, etc.), are provided to complement the admission decision. The diploma is, again, just one more fact in a subjective review of the student's background.

Student financial assistance, one of the most critical support services, does have specific rules related to the high school diploma. These rules are:

- Federal student aid programs (grant, work and loan) require the student to have a high school diploma, a GED, or a passing score on a federally regulated "ability to benefit" (ATB) exam. The ATB exam is not the strict equivalent of a diploma, but rather an exam to ensure the student has sufficient skills to benefit from the education being offered. Many students in California who lack high school diplomas receive federal funds under this ATB provision.
- Campus-based state student aid programs (CCC BOG Fee Waivers, UC Grant, CSU Grant, miscellaneous minor programs) complement admissions decisions and do not have specific statutory requirements related to the diploma.
- The Competitive Cal Grants (Cal Grant A, B and C) do not have high school diploma requirements. These programs are designed to help older nontraditional students and the statutes mandate a review of grades and socioeconomic factors other than the diploma.

- The Entitlement Cal Grants (Cal Grant A, B and the Transfer Entitlement) require students to have a high school diploma, a GED or a passing score on the California High School Proficiency Exam. There is no additional test (such as the federal ATB) currently in use. Note these students must also have a satisfactory high school GPA (3.0 for middle income, 2.0 for low income) so the number to be affected by failing the CASHEE is expected to be quite small.

In sum, the CASHEE will have either no effect, or only a marginal or subjective effect, in postsecondary admissions, support and student financial aid programs, with the significant exception of eligibility for the State Cal Grant Entitlement Programs.

This brings me to the first of the two issues I would like to discuss, eligibility for the Cal Grant Entitlement Programs. In this area, we are hopeful your pursuit of CASHEE alternatives provides desperately needed relief for students who are meritorious and meet the Cal Grant high school grade point average requirements, and yet, for a range of reasons, have not successfully passed the CASHEE. We are particularly concerned about students who came to the US so recently that sufficient English language skills have not yet been acquired to pass the language exam but whose academic records demonstrate ability to succeed in postsecondary education. Denial of assistance to such students is unfair and not in the best interest of California's pursuit of educational opportunity for its citizens.

In addition, we ask you to ponder with us the policy ramifications of the possible use of the federal ATB exam as an additional testing opportunity to provide student aid opportunity. Some have suggested such an exam might be appropriate to provide eligibility for vocational or two-year programs but not four-year programs. While, in truth, the exam tends to be administered for students who are more directed toward vocational programs, such a restriction, if placed in regulation or statute would be nearly impossible to implement and could cause significant inequity and confusion. In reality, almost all CCC vocational courses are transferable to four-year colleges as electives. Many students begin in basic skills or vocational coursework and build upon these units to receive an AA degree and then go onto BA degree coursework. Many students take one or two remedial courses while embarking on a lower-division, transferable course pattern. The Cal Grant eligibility of such students would be much too complicated if there were some statutory restriction of this type and student opportunity would be rigidly restricted.

The federal ATB exam might better be used as a temporary measure for the Cal Grant Entitlement Programs (two or three years at most) in all institutions. This temporary measure would provide one additional opportunity for students who fail the CASHEE (yet have good high school grades) while policymakers in K-12 and higher education look at who is affected, their grades, their success in college, and other items to inform decisions related to the most appropriate permanent policies in this area. This would also allow time for CDE to adopt and implement alternatives to the CASHEE to ensure educational opportunity for capable students. The ATB exam could be adopted through administrative or emergency regulatory action by the Student Aid Commission. If a permanent change in the law is desired, statute could be sought after appropriate research.

The second issue I would like to address is broader and of potentially greater consequence. *What message of future opportunity are we sending to those who fail this exam??* All across California students are faced with a message of failure. Have we also let them know California still promises educational opportunity for them? That this State embraces the notion of second chance, that no student is turned away from the community colleges, that federal and state student aid programs will support their future endeavors, that, in short, they are still valued and have a future in California education? I urge you to be certain that this message is clearly and individually delivered to every student who fails this exam. They simply must know there is a brighter future and that California has not turned its back on them. At a time in which we struggle mightily with the challenges of college outreach, we could do significant damage to California's participation rate in higher education if we fail to deliver the message of lifelong learning and training opportunities to these students.

I leave you with three specific recommendations:

1. Please find CASHEE alternatives for capable students as quickly as possible. A portion of their financial aid assistance rests on that action and these students are often from low-income, disadvantaged families. They need your immediate help.
2. Work with the Student Aid Commission to find temporary, non-statutory ways to ensure the continuity of college opportunity for those students who have proven themselves worthy through satisfactory grade point averages, and work with the Student Aid Commission to research this policy area to determine the most appropriate permanent policies for such students.
3. Deliver an individual message to every student who has not yet passed the CASHEE that clearly tells them California still welcomes them in postsecondary education and will provide them with the courses and the support they need to build a successful future.

Thank you for your consideration.